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The Stopgap

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The Stopgap

Thirty wears different on different people. On different women. Some wear it like a pair of designer shoes ordered off eBay. It doesn't matter if it's fake or real, the stamped insignia on the sole infuses a well-played strut to the hip that no mare in heat could touch and anyway, it was a steal. Others wear it like a war medal, the sheen of newness worn to a dull matte but it's still something meant to be proud of. And pride is a powerful perfume. For most of those women – my women, my peers I guess – it was something to feign indifference to. Some of us had big parties, invited anyone we'd ever had a passing acquaintance with, and delighted in the fact that thank god we're not in the bar scene anymore and all those girls in the clubs look so goddamned young now. Some of us had quiet shindigs – that's what we call it now, or an "intimate gathering," in lieu of regrettable shenanigans – and told ourselves that's all we really care about. Good friends, friends good enough that we could marginally stand to be in each other's company for an evening. Good wine, as we learnt dutifully via all those hangovers in our twenties when we spent our college financial aid on overpriced wine tours, all stuffed into limos like my thighs are stuffed into this dress, and in the end we decide we like a pinot with hints of sassafras and black cherry better than a cabernet because, let's face it, that's what we saw in Sideways. I had opted for the "close friends only" farce three months ago and I'd barely spoken a word to any of those ridiculous people since. Like sentimental lovers in the grasp of disillusionment, this milestone and I had passed each other like two blind, reaching paddleboats in the night, the only nod of acknowledgement a sloppy slap of oars on still water.

It's already 10:30 on this Saturday night. I will my phone to blink its teasing red light. I pray – pray – to whoever may be able to bore into my brain and understand dear god I want to hear that squealing chirp of a message. Silence. A dog barks outside. Shit. It's time to go. November in Portland in a one-room basement apartment is a cheap wood-paneled hole heated with an open oven. If it were the 1960's I could stick my head in there and hope someone would find me and take pity before I actually did something stupid. A mailman maybe or a nosy meter checker. I've only had two long pulls from the whisky bottle – can't be sloppy – and tell myself I'm not tired. It's Saturday night, I can't be tired and I can't afford to drink out so I save my caffeine fix for the two dollar coffee that buys me a couple hours of camping at the bar. In my clearance-rack dress from the junior's section of Meier & Frank, I adjust my breasts in the plunging bra that I had to special order and cost more than the dress but make my tits defy gravity. My legs still look good. Not that thirty's old, but I still have the legs of a wavering colt so thank you, mother.

I grab my vintage stewardess coat and climb the lint-ridden stairs past the communal washer and dryer and let the night swallow me whole. Impending winter in the northwest is a horrific tease of a whore. She gives you just enough to make you wonder and even after twenty years here she can burrow into me with the fluidity of a tic. As I slide into my little red car, the jelly belly, my phone comes to life with the scream of a nocturnal night bird. "sup ho you busy." Goddamnit, Jen. I hate when it's not him. I hate when other people use that precious, rip my hair out need to get it keen and it's not from him. I'll ignore her until I get to downtown.

The roads are drunk-driving familiar. I could drive them blind and half mad and in fact I probably have. I know them like the curves of my body, like the swells of his chest, like the overbearing sweetness of that peach lotion I wore until the night I lost my virginity fifteen years ago and then never again. Yet when I found a nearly empty bottle riddled among other “sentimentalities” of youth, it brought back that night like a punch to the gut. Maneuvering the slick roads, across the Sellwood Bridge, into the failing heart of the city it’s evident why Portland is home to so many serial killers. The stretches of forest with gaping mouths eager to devour the high rises and streets that rightfully belong to it. The relentless rain intent on flooding us out like gophers. The homeless and all of us so hell-bent on imitating them.

The valet at The Nines doesn’t charge if you look fuckable and in this city if you can half-pass as a woman and have all your limbs, you are. I’ve seen these boys for three years, racing in and out of the night flanked in black making laundry a necessity only twice a month, and they still give me their practiced grin like they don’t have a clue who I am. Screw them. The streets are forever slicked with rain and all of my attention is on not falling on my face in my cheap shoes. Three years and I still never remember which floor the bar is on. The good bar, not the optimistic one with the desire to be L.A. but can only capture all the eyes fervently scanning the room and none of the good stuff.

Here’s the thing about the bar at The Nines. It is, even by my account, lovely. Just lovely. And grand, and sweeping, and all of those phrases you find on Trip Advisor’s hotel reviews but the floors must be made of petroleum. Once I make it to the bar, past the naked mannequins, supposedly romantic couplet chairs sectioned off by gauzy curtains, booths filled with awkward dates and dated couples watching everyone but each other – when I make it there, I slide my daily lunge- and squat-laden seat on the barstool with no intention of moving until I know where I’m spending the night. Which, at this rate, I likely won’t know for hours. The bartenders, however, do know me here. Something you learn real quick when you start drinking is to tip well, smile when you don’t mean it – especially when you don’t mean it – and always look like you’re waiting for someone. You know you’re not waiting for someone. The bartenders know you’re not waiting for someone. But the men prowling like polyester-clad penned bulls that don’t yet know castration is just around the corner don’t know it. Call it pride, dignity, whatever but I never let a man I don’t intend to see again buy me a drink.

Chirp. Fuck, Jen. “im makin spanish coffee but dont have any coffee get here now.” If nothing else, it’s an excuse to look busy.

“Out,” I text. She knows what it means.

“with C???”

“No.” Clearly she’s alone.

“who with?”

“Alone.” Alone.

“ur fucked up.”

“You should smile more.” The pitfall of engrossing yourself in your phone is that you leave yourself vulnerable. He was maybe thirty-five, not yet even buzzed. Short, with the complexion of someone much younger, and the only tell of age blossoming in the creased petals of his eyes. I hate being told I should smile more.

“Mmm hmm,” I mumble, looking away and cupping the hot bitter coffee.

“Why don’t you smile more?” He leaned against the bar, his ass nearly reaching the seat next to mine. I cannot let this man sit down. What to say. Fuck. I ignore him. Look at my phone. Now, Jen, would be a great time to text. “You waiting for your boyfriend?”

An exit sign glowed dim. “Yes.”

He nodded and we both downed the lie. We waited the requisite minute of awkwardness before he slipped away onto more favorable-looking opportunities.

“I just got hit on by a creeper,” I texted Jen. No response.

The bartender, the tall blond that was probably ravishing in his youth back in the 80’s, silently pours me a fresh coffee with a smile. I adore him – he almost never talks. “Club soda with lime when you get the chance,” I tell him and he skillfully creates a loving masterpiece of a drink with deft, long fingers. It looks like a vodka soda. On the most base level, I fit in.

Midnight is my fence. It will go one of two ways. Make that three if you count Vishal. One, I go home alone – pissed off and imagining C fucking around with countless other women. Two, he finally texts after he’s exhausted all other options. I go to his place, the remnants of my anger evaporate and I tuck them deep inside within minutes of walking through the door. Three, I run into Vishal – as I nearly always do – and C doesn’t call and Vishal and I go to his place where we slow dance to early R.E.M. like teenagers, cuddle while we watch old James Bond movies and I sit between his legs while he finger-combs my hair. I tell him he’s a terrible chief of surgery, what a mess his place is, and he tells me I’m so young and one day I’ll understand and look back and think, “Fuck, he was right.” Or he’ll get drunk, cry and tell me he loves me and I’ll pretend I’m asleep.

I can’t take the coffee anymore. At the corner of the bar, two men and an aphotic-skinned girl laugh. One of the men is nearly my type – in that he loosely resembles C – brown skin, what I can only imagine are genuine diamonds in his ears, a natural swagger that screams years of casual sex and a Ph.D. The other is the friend as you can hardly call him a wingman. Bald. On the wrong side of pudgy. But with deep-reaching dimples and a confidence that can only be bred from intellect and success. The girl, I don’t know. Non-threatening. Like most women.

Blond Bartender refills my soda. My phone is still quiet, a sulking waxy toad. It’s 12:30.

“Does the new update work for you?” The bald man is at my side, his squinted brown eyes searching mine. Nice eyes. But I preferred his friend.

“What?”

“Your phone – we have the same phone.” His smile is the only beautiful thing about him – perfect white teeth, solid as a horse.

“Oh. No. Sorry.” I don’t know what I’m doing.

“I’m Javier.” He doesn’t look Latin but suddenly I see the traces. The skin that’s not browned but would turn so with an hour in the sun. Eyes like chips of baker’s chocolate.

In some whirl of social motion I’m not adept at, all three of them surround me like hungry bees. I forget the girl’s name the moment I hear it. She’s from Sri Lanka and instantly I see C in her. Eyes bottomless as wells, soft buttery throat, the lilting accent, I suddenly find her magnificent. The other man – the more attractive one – has a mouth

full of sunshine and I can almost see the stains of too many foolish women. Javier looks at me like he's about to win a prize at the carnival. Maybe he is. The girl tells me I'm beautiful. When other women tell you that, that's when feel your pockets for ammunition. She's not with either of them. I don't know if she wants to be.

Javier says something. About soccer or the crap work that's Intel or maybe a crap interoffice soccer league at Intel. Of course he works at Intel. Every Ph.D. in this godforsaken town works at Intel. I laugh and give them my pretty smile that's fooled even the most jaded of bouncers. The smile without much gum. And then it happens. I haven't watched the door the entire night. But I'm drawn to it, like a shell falling into an automatic with that satisfying copper cling, and everyone else is dust.

Here's how I see him, how I've always seen him – a perfectly imperfect being. Long black hair curling down his back. Ores for eyes that put the nameless Sri Lankan girl to shame, her eyes are only as deep as tide pools. The movement of his body is imprinted on my mind. Through the doorway, trailing behind him is another forgettable woman. Plain. Even mousy. She towers over me in her flat forgettable shoes. The moment he passes me, with my glued grin on my face, freezes itself in my brain. His eyebrows rise in a "what can I do?" attempt at normality. Fuck him.

"...go somewhere else?" It was a man's voice. I don't know if it's Javier or the more attractive one.

"Yes." I slip my phone into my bra, I've always hated carrying a purse. The miasma of body heat and cologne clings to me. I can nearly taste the staleness of the night on my skin. C and the woman sit in a corner booth. He goes to the bar to order. I hate that woman with everything in me. To the bone. The Sri Lankan girl wants a photo. Sure, yes, whatever and I pose with her as if she were blood kin, feeling the eyes of C crawl over me, fire ants I can't brush off.

The night air doesn't bite but chews softly, lovingly against my bare ankles. Javier looks hopeful and I flagellate myself for giving him that – hope of a wife, a girlfriend, an easy fuck I don't know, anything, but he's going home alone tonight. The elevator opens its steely arms and holds us tight. And C doesn't turn around, his oiled black hair coiled like a snake leaning into the waiting mouse.

The Sri Lankan girl's eyes dance – they dance with a suppleness and grace I simply wasn't built for. Her small, compact frame is alive with energy, the cocktails barely making a dent in the perfection. "That was my... ex," I say. Javier's smile melts off his face. "In the bar."

"Stop," she says. We all stop. "Who?"

"The guy who came to the bar as we left."

"Great," Javier or the more attractive one says. Probably Javier. We're huddled on a street corner, the deadness of 1am pulling its blanket over our heads.

"He's..." she starts, thumbing through her mind for the right words.

"Indian," I fill in the blank for her.

"Oh, well, you know..." she starts, unsure of her footing, her natural grace toppled like a shot aged horse.

"Gujarati. Jain," I offer. It's a ballistic game of Mad Libs.

"That will never happen," she says evenly, each word dropping from her lips like a bomb. A minefield that's buried inside me for two years. And along she comes and

pulls the pins. We walk, the mood shifted, the girl and I cling to each other through the cold like comrades.

On the familiar corner next to Powell's Books, the muted thumping of a nightclub wails its siren's cry, a scorned but forgiving lover. I'm not drunk enough for this. I scan the room for Vishal, nothing. He must be at the hospital or already pounced on some young, stupid thing. I'm not buzzed at all anymore, the liquor from home scoured clean from coffee and blunt reality. I can always make my way to the throbbing core of the dance floor, women with makeup sweating off their face and men watching the crowd for the least resistance. Someone's hand is on my waist, pulling unfamiliar and too needy. The more attractive man looks at me with hooded eyes. The girl throws her head back and laughs like a hyena. She's not beautiful anymore. What the fuck am I doing.

"Do you want a drink?"

"What?" I ask, leaning into Javier. Why am I leaning into him. I don't want to be here.

"Can I buy you a drink?" Streams of sweat are falling down his throat into the hollows of his chest.

"Sure." He doesn't ask me what. My phone vibrates against my chest, what I've waited for all night.

"Where you at?" I try and ignore it. Javier still isn't back and I've lost his gleaming head in the dimness. The vibration slams into my chest again like a missile. "Don't be mad."

At 2am in every club in the world, it's easy to disappear. I take reverence in it. The short, clipped walk. The surveying of the crowd. The cradling of the night and the comforting stroke of the smoker's shawl that embraces you right outside the door. This is my moment. My favorite moment.

The jelly belly is only a yellow ticket away. Pulling my coat around me, it's magic. I no longer exist as a possibility and only the most drunk of the lot even bother pulling out their last ditch effort. I am whole. The valet is a new one, tired and worn from the evening. He's changed the station and lowered the volume – my car is cold, waking. I know every curve and line of these streets, every dip and every flaw. An abandoned parking space opens to me, spreads itself wide in want and the garish neon lights of the adjacent strip club flash in lazy, wanton suspension.

I am an ugly crier. Aren't we all. Tears are hideous, my tears are hideous, hot tongues licking down my face, rash and prickled like a cat's. The gulping, the animal moans and growls, the absolute idiocy and uselessness of it all.

Trembling where my heart is meant to be. "Come to me." A banal absurdity of a command.